Tips to help you improve your English grammar and word usage skills

- Grammar is a set of rules (subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, etc.) that governs, or explains, how we use language. It also defines the types of words (nouns, verbs, etc.) and word groups (prepositional phrases, noun clauses, etc.) we use to make up sentences. A subset of grammar, syntax is the way we arrange words and phrases in sentences (e.g., the basic word order in English is subject-verb-object).

- Word usage refers to the correct and incorrect use of words and phrases in sentences (for example, accept vs. except and its vs. it's).
- Understanding and following principles of proper grammar and correct word usage, such as those presented in this guide, will help you to express your ideas more clearly and precisely, and to better comprehend the message others wish to convey.

**SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT**

In sentences, subjects and verbs must agree in number—a singular verb takes a singular subject, and a plural verb takes a plural subject. Errors occur when it is unclear whether the subject is singular or plural. Consider the following:

- **Compound subjects take a plural verb.**

  **EXAMPLE:**
  - My coat and my hat are in the closet.

- **When compound subjects contain both a singular and a plural noun or pronoun joined by or or nor, the verb agrees with the subject closest to it.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - The girls or their father prepares breakfast on the weekends.
  - Neither my cousin nor his friend knows where the party is.

- **Pronouns such as each, either, everyone, everybody, neither, nobody, and someone take a singular verb.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - Each is expected to pay his share.
  - Either works well for me.
  - Someone is entering the room.

- A phrase or clause can separate the subject from the verb. Disregard these elements (underlined in the sentences below) when deciding on a singular or plural verb.

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - One of the doors has been left ajar.
  - The opera, including three intermissions, lasts for four hours.
  - All the volunteers who arrived for the training class were eager to begin.

- **Sentences with the phrase one of take a singular or plural verb, depending on meaning.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - George is just one of the players who have trained hard this season.
  - George is the only one of the players who has trained hard this season.

- **TIP:** Rephrasing sentences with one of helps you clarify the subject and choose the correct verb.

  The sentences above can be rephrased as follows, respectively: Along with George, other players have trained hard this season. Of all the players, only George has trained hard this season.

- **Linking verbs (be, seem, feel, appear) agree with their subject, not their complement.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - Mia's favorite snack seems to be roasted peanuts.
  - Roasted peanuts are Mia's favorite snack.

- **Portion words (percent, majority, fraction, all, some, none) followed by a prepositional phrase with of take a singular or plural verb, depending on whether the object of the phrase is singular or plural.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - Fifty percent of the work is done.
  - All of the posters are here.
  - Fifty percent of the work is done.
  - All of the posters are here.

- **Sums of money and periods of time always take a singular verb.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - One hundred years is a long time.
  - Forty dollars is sufficient for now.

- **Collective nouns (audience, class, colony, committee, jury, team) can be singular or plural, depending on their meaning.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - The jury makes an effort to win each game. (members act as a group)
  - The jury disagrees on the guilt of the accused. (members act as individuals)

- **Some subjects look singular but are plural.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - The data are consistent with the predictions of earlier studies.
  - What are the criteria for membership in the club?

- **TIP:** Data (sing., datum) and criteria (sing., criterion) are of Latin and Greek derivation, respectively, and retain their original singular and plural forms.

**TENSE SHIFTS**

- **Tense** is the form of a verb that indicates time. Unnecessary shifts in tense lead to confusion about when something is happening. **Incorrect:** As Jean was walking down the street, her neighbor had waved to her. **Correct:** As Jean was walking down the street, her neighbor waved to her.

- **Incorrect:** When Julia saw the baby, she gazed into his eyes and began to cry. **Correct:** When Julia saw the baby, she gazed into his eyes and began to cry.

- **NOTE:** As illustrated in the above sentences, as and when are often used to indicate that things are happening simultaneously or within the same time period.

**PRONOUN SHIFTS IN NUMBER OR PERSON**

Pronouns are used to replace other words to simplify a sentence and avoid repetition. The word the pronoun replaces is called the antecedent. Confusion and errors occur when:

- **more than one word could be the antecedent.**

**RUN-ON SENTENCES**

- **A run-on sentence** is two or more independent clauses that have no punctuation (fused sentence) or incorrect punctuation (comma splice).

  **EXAMPLE:**
  - It was a windy day Mary flew her kite in the field.
  - (fused)
  - It was a windy day Mary flew her kite in the field.
  - (comma splice)

- **Run-on sentences can be corrected in several ways.**

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - It was a windy day, Mary flew her kite in the field. (form two separate sentences)

  - Because it was a windy day, Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a subordinating conjunction and comma at the end of the dependent clause)

  - It was a windy day, and Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a comma and coordinating conjunction)

  - It was a windy day; so, Mary flew her kite in the field. (add a semicolon and coordinating conjunction)
SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

- A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence (lacking a subject or a verb) that is punctuated as if it were complete.

**EXAMPLES:**

- Built a huge swimming pool in the backyard. (fragment)
- Our neighbors built a huge swimming pool in the backyard. (subject)
- The newly-elected Congressman in our district. (no verb)
- The newly-elected Congressman in our district voted in favor of the bill. (subject)

**NOTE:** Sentence fragments often begin with a subordinating conjunction that introduces a dependent clause that has become disconnected from the main clause.

**EXAMPLES:**

- We went to bed immediately. Because it was midnight when we arrived.
- We went to bed immediately because it was midnight when we arrived.

**NOTE:** Sentence fragments should always be avoided in formal writing. However, they are acceptable in literary work. For example, The clock struck twelve. Nothing. The clock struck one. Still nothing. Why hadn’t she called?

COMMAS

Commas are often omitted, overused, or used incorrectly. Consider the following:

- Commas are used to set off:
  - introductory words, phrases, and clauses.
    - adverbs
      - EXAMPLES:
        - Frankly, the film was highly overrated and boring.
        - First, you need to write a draft of the letter.
    - transitional phrases
      - EXAMPLES:
        - Nevertheless, you still need to complete and sign the form.
        - Furthermore, her argument is more logical than yours.
  - signal phrases for quotations
    - EXAMPLES:
      - Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”
      - “No,” cried Dolly, “I will not change my mind.”
  - prepositional phrases
    - EXAMPLES:
      - After preparing the lengthy report, John left for home.
      - During the winter, we spend more time indoors.

- subordinate clauses
  - EXAMPLES:
    - When Heloise speaks, everyone listens.
    - Because we had extra time, we stopped to visit Aunt Jean.
    - nonrestrictive clauses (not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence).
      - EXAMPLES:
        - Jake, who is my cousin, wrote that article.
        - Those earrings, which you bought last week, are beautiful.

- items in a series of words, phrases, or clauses.
  - EXAMPLES:
    - We sang, danced, and ate heartily at the party.
    - Roy rode up the hill, through the park, and around the lake.
    - Nancy made the cake, Sue decorated it, and we all enjoyed it!

- TIP: Use semicolons when commas might cause confusion. For example, At twenty-three Meg left Bridgeport, the city where she was born and raised; moved to Rome, the city of her dreams; and spent the next twenty years working for the Italian Red Cross.

- independent clauses in compound sentences joined by and, but, so, yet, or, nor, for.
  - EXAMPLES:
    - Sue wrote the story, and Tom edited it.
    - We could have stayed longer, but we decided it was best to leave.

- Commas should not be used with:
  - compound structures
    - **INCORRECT:** Melinda, and her sister will attend the ceremony.
    - **CORRECT:** Melinda and her sister will attend the ceremony.
  - restrictive elements (elements essential to the basic meaning of a sentence)
    - **INCORRECT:** People, who fail to recycle, do not help the environment.
    - **CORRECT:** People who fail to recycle do not help the environment.
  - two independent clauses that should be joined by a conjunction (comma splice)
    - **INCORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday, we were tired.
    - **CORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday; we were tired.
  - Because we walked into town yesterday, we were tired.
  - **CORRECT:** We walked into town yesterday, and we were tired.
  - We walked into town yesterday; so, we were tired.

APOSTROPHES

- The apostrophe, which is often misused or overused, has two basic functions: to show the omission of letters in contractions and to indicate possession.

  **EXAMPLES:**
  - In contractions, the apostrophe replaces the omitted letter.
    - It’s snowing today. (It is)
    - He’s a great leader. (He is)
  - You know the answer, don’t you? (do not)

- To indicate possession, add an apostrophe and an s (‘s):
  - to singular nouns, acronyms, and indefinite pronouns (even if they end in s).
    - **EXAMPLES:**
      - the girl’s book
      - NATO’s members
      - someone’s hat
      - Charles’ car
      - Note: A simple apostrophe is also acceptable in the last example: Charles’ car.
    - to plural nouns that do not end in s.
      - **EXAMPLES:**
        - the women’s club
        - the children’s songs
      - when the noun that should follow is implied.
        - **EXAMPLE:**
          - This is her mother’s, not her jacket.
      - to the end of singular and plural compound nouns.

DOUBLE NEGATIVES

- A double negative is not appropriate in formal writing. Often the error can be corrected by deleting one of the negatives.
  - **INCORRECT:** We do not have no time to finish the report.
  - **CORRECT:** We do not have time to finish the report.
  - **CORRECT:** We do not have time to finish the report.

- Words such as scarcely, hardly, and barely are considered negatives and should not be used with other negatives.
  - **INCORRECT:** I hardly have any money.
  - **CORRECT:** I hardly have no money.

- **CORRECT:** I hardly have any money.

MISUSED MODIFIERS

Modifiers are adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses that modify or describe other words in a sentence. Modifiers need to be placed as close as possible to the words they modify or describe.

- A misplaced modifier can easily confuse readers by seeming to modify some other element in the sentence.
  - **INCORRECT:** The hikers saw the eagles swooping and diving with binoculars.
  - Who was wearing the binoculars, the eagles?
  - **CORRECT:** With binoculars, the hikers saw the eagles swooping and diving.

- **TIP:** To avoid ambiguity, the adverb only should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies in a sentence.
  - **SENTENCE 1:** The band only sang five songs at the concert.
  - **SENTENCE 2:** The band sang only five songs at the concert.
  - **EXPLANATION:** Sentence 1 suggests that the band sang, rather than played, five songs. Sentence 2 suggests that the band sang five, as opposed to six, seven, or other number of songs.

- A dangling modifier appears at the beginning or end of a sentence and is intended to modify something that is not always explicitly stated.
  - A dangling modifier can make it difficult or impossible to clearly understand a message.
  - **INCORRECT:** As a young boy, my father taught me how to swim.
  - Who was a young boy—the father or the author of the sentence?
CORRECT: When I was a young boy, my father taught me how to swim.

- Be aware that some dangling modifiers are not easy to detect.

INCORRECT: Thinking about the exam, my nerves got shattered.

CORRECT: Thinking about the exam, I got nervous.

Unique is an absolute modifier meaning “one of a kind.” Comparatives, superlatives, and words like very, so, or extremely should not be used to modify it.

INCORRECT: Her new piano has a very unique sound.

CORRECT: Her new piano has a unique sound.

NOTE: Often a similar word can be used in place of an absolute word. In those instances, a modifier is appropriate.

INCORRECT: This piano has a more unique sound than that one.

CORRECT: This piano has a more distinctive sound than that one.

COMMON ABSOLUTE WORDS

dead  finite  mortal
entirely  identical  opposite
eternal  immortal  perfect
fatal  infinite  right
final  irrevocable  straight

SPLIT INFINITIVES

A split infinitive occurs when a word (usually an adverb) comes between to and the verb in the infinitive.

INCORRECT: She wanted to quickly go to the gym.

CORRECT: She wanted to go quickly to the gym.

NOTE: Split infinitives should always be avoided in formal writing. However, because they have become part of everyday speech, fiction writers often use them in dialogue (conversation between characters in a play or narrative) in order to make their characters seem more like real people.

OTHER COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES

/an/ - Use a before consonant sounds and an before vowel sounds.

EXAMPLES:
a large hole
a hollow sound
an army of three
an honorable man

different from / different than - Different from is used with simple comparisons, as in comparing two persons or things. Different than can be used instead of different from when the words following it make up a clause.

EXAMPLES:
Spain is quite different from France.
The play was different than what I had expected.

NOTE: In the second example, different from could also be used.

i.e. - The abbreviation i.e. is id est, meaning “that is” or “in other words.” The abbreviation e.g. is exempli gratia, meaning “for example.” A comma follows both.

EXAMPLES:
The judge sentenced him to the maximum allowed under the law, i.e., ten years.
We need to find a quiet place to study, e.g., the library.

me vs. I - Choosing between me and I is difficult when the words are used with other nouns or pronouns.

INCORRECT: It was me who sent that message.

CORRECT: It was I who sent that message.

TIP: When choosing between me or I, it is helpful to simplify the sentence, use both words, and choose the one that makes sense. “Me sent the message, I sent the message.” The correct choice is I.

INCORRECT: Daisy gave the package to Marcy and I.

CORRECT: Daisy gave the package to Marcy and me.

TIP: When talking about yourself and another person, take the other person out of the sentence and decide whether I or me makes sense. “Daisy gave the package to me.” “Daisy gave the package to her.” The correct choice is me.

nonplussed - Nonplussed is an adjective that means “perplexed or bewildered.”

EXAMPLE: They were nonplussed by the confusion surrounding her.

NOTE: Be careful not to attribute the opposite meaning to nonplussed, as the word is commonly thought to mean “calm, unperturbed, or unruffled.”

penultimate - Meaning “next to last,” penultimate is often mistakenly used to mean the very last, or the ultimate.

EXAMPLE: The stress in Spanish words often falls on the penultimate syllable.

who vs. whom (whoever vs. whomever) - It depends on whether it is the subject or object. Whom/whoever is used when referring to the subject of a clause or phrase; who/whomever, when referring to the object of a clause or phrase.

INCORRECT: Dr. Vargas is the scientist whom wrote the paper.

CORRECT: Dr. Vargas is the scientist who wrote the paper. (subject of verb wrote)

TIP: To choose between who or whom in a relative clause, divide the statement into two sentences and replace who or whom with a subject and object pronoun. “Dr. Vargas is the scientist, he wrote the paper.” He wrote the paper. The subject pronoun he makes sense, so the correct choice is who.

INCORRECT: For who was the song written?

CORRECT: For whom was the song written? (object of preposition for)

TIP: To choose between who or whom in a question, answer the question with a subject or object pronoun to see which makes sense. “The song was written for her.” “The song was written for she.” The object pronoun her makes sense, so the correct choice is whom.

INCORRECT: We must speak respectfully to whoever we meet.

CORRECT: We must speak respectfully to whomever we meet. (object of verb meet)
COMMON VERB FORM PITFALLS

Many verbs have irregular past participle forms. Below is a list of some of the verbs that cause the most confusion. Consult a dictionary for other verbs and verb parts not listed here.

Irregular Verb Forms

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COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS

It is important to choose the proper words when you express yourself so that your message is easily and correctly understood. Misused words can involve mixing up words that sound alike, using a word with the wrong shade of meaning, or using a word with a completely wrong meaning. Following is a list of easily confused words.

accept/except: Accept means “to take willingly.” Except means “to leave out.” Except can also be a preposition meaning “but.”

I accepted her advice.
Dan invited all his friends, but excepted Tim.
Everyone sang except Sue.

acute/chronic: Acute means “extremely sharp or severe.” Chronic means “long-lasting or recurrent.”

Jen called the doctor when she experienced acute pain in her neck.

Lupus is a chronic condition that people live with for the rest of their lives.

adapt/adopt: Adapt means “to change.” Adopt means “to take as one’s own.”

We adapted immediately to the warm, sunny climate.
Susan adopted a stray cat.

adverse/averse: Adverse means “unfavorable, contrary, or hostile.” Averse means “having a strong feeling of opposition, antipathy, or repugnance.”

The plane took off despite the adverse weather conditions.

Luke is averse to studying, which explains why he fails all his tests.

affection: Affection is usually a verb meaning “to influence.” Effect is usually a noun meaning “result or outcome.” Effect can also be used as a verb meaning “to cause to happen or to bring about.”

Drew's ability to affect people ensures his success as a doctor.

One effect of the storm was a three-day power outage.

Only the principal can effect major changes to school policy.

afterward/afterword: Afterward is an adverb meaning “at a later time, subsequently.” Afterword is an epilogue (passage) added at the end of a book.

First we went to the recital and afterward to the restaurant.
The author explained the symbolism of each character in the afterword.

aggravate/irritate: Aggravate means “to make worse.” Irritate means “to annoy” or “to cause minor pain.”

Her constant teasing aggravated the situation.

His constant teasing irritated me.

The salt water irritated my eyes.

aide/aide: Aide generally refers to a personal assistant; whereas aid refers to an inanimate object.
The kind, sympathetic aide cared for the sick woman.
We will provide as much aid as possible.

all ready/already: All ready means “completely prepared.” Already means “previously.”
The packages are all ready to be shipped.
We sent three packages already.

all together/altogether: All together means “in a group.” Altogether means “completely.”
We went all together to the beach.
It was an altogether crazy idea.

allude/refer: To allude is to suggest without naming. To refer is to speak of directly.
LOU alluded to his parents when he spoke about positive role models.
Pat referred to her own experience with the product to highlight its usefulness.

allusion/illusion: An allusion is an indirect reference to something. An illusion is a misconception or false impression.
Our instructor made several allusions to Hemingway's works.
The miracle in the desert is an illusion.

alternate/alternative: As nouns, alternate means “a substitute or second” or “every other in a series,” and alternative refers to or implies a choice between two things. As verbs,
COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS cont.

alternately means “in turn, one after another,” and alternatively means “on the other hand.”

The jury alternate was not called on to vote.
(noun)

If the flight is grounded, an alternative would be to go by train. (noun)

Pam and I drove alternately so neither of us would get tired. (adverb)

We might go to a movie or, alternatively, to the theater. (adverb)

NOTE: Alternate, with the stress on the last syllable, can be a verb. It is related to the adjective and means “to go back and forth” or “to change from one state to another and back again repeatedly.” For example, “Alternate the colors so that no two are next to each other.”

anxious/eager: Anxious means “uneasy or apprehensive.” Eager means “enthusiastic.”

Lucy is anxious about the upcoming exam.

I am eager to meet my new grandson.

apart/a part: Apart is normally used as an adverb. It can be used as a preposition when joined with the word from. A part is two words, the article plus a noun.

The shed blew apart in the storm. (adverb)

I saw no one apart from you. (preposition)

The motor is missing a part of the flywheel. (noun)

appraise/appraise: Appraise means “to assess or value something.” Apprise means “to teach or inform.”

His performance was appraised positively.

I lost no time in apprising her of the situation.

aural/oral: Aural refers to the ears and hearing.

Oral refers to the mouth and speaking.

The tape used for the aural exam was defective; no one could understand it.

The dentist performed a thorough oral exam and found nothing of concern.

awhile/a while: Awhile is an adverb which means “for some time.” A while is two words, the article plus a noun, and is usually used after the preposition for.

I thought awhile before I answered.

I thought for a while before I answered.

bad/badly: Bad is an adjective that is often used with linking verbs such as look, feel, sound, or be. Badly is an adverb that describes verbs. As many adverbs do, badly answers the question How?

She felt bad about missing the concert.

The team played badly last night and lost the game.

beside/besides: Beside is an adverb that means “next to.” Besides is a preposition that means “in addition to.”

I sat beside Lena at the game.

Besides sugar, what else do you need?

between/among: Between is used with two people or things. Among is used with three or more people or things.

She had to choose between the blue and the green hat.

We divided the pie among the three of us.

can/may: Can, as an auxiliary verb, means “to be able to.” May, as an auxiliary verb, means “to be permitted to” or “to have the ability to.”

Marsha can swim faster than anyone I know.

May I have the butter, please?

capital/capitol: Capital refers to a city and capitol to a building where lawmakers meet.

Capital also refers to wealth or resources.

The capital of Pennsylvania is Harrisburg.

Traffic was at a standstill around the capitol.

Without sufficient capital, a company cannot grow.

cite/site/sight: Cite is a verb that means “to quote as an authority or example,” or “to recognize formally.” Site is a noun that refers to a location; sight is a noun that refers to something that is seen.

I cited several scholars in my study of water resources.

The mayor was cited for his service to the city.

They chose a new site for the factory just outside of town.

The sight of the glaciers left me feeling cold.

climactic/climatic: Climactic comes from climax, the point of greatest intensity in a series of events. Climatic comes from climate and refers to meteorological conditions.

My cell phone rang at the climactic moment of the film.

Before visiting a city, one should become familiar with its climatic conditions.

complement/compliment: Complement refers to something that completes or goes well with.

Compliment refers to praise or flattery. Both words can be used as nouns or verbs.

That scarf is a perfect complement to your outfit.

We sent our compliments to the chef for the delicious meal.

concurrent/consecutive: Concurrent means “simultaneous or happening at the same time as something else.” Consecutive means “successive or following one after the other.”

Your arrival was concurrent with his departure.

Can you name the months in French in consecutive order?

connote/denote: Connote means “to imply or suggest.” Denote means “to indicate or refer to specifically.”

Your letter connotes a certain arrogance.

In his speech, the President denoted his intention to improve public education.

continually/continuously: Continually means “frequently recurring or intermittent.”

Continuously means “occurring without interruption.”

Her friends continually urged her to spend time in Europe with them.

My roommate plays his stereo continually from morning until night.

convince/persuade: Generally speaking, one convinces a person that something is true but persuades a person to do something.

Now that I see my good grades, I am convinced that my parents were right to persuade me to play less and study more.

council/counsel: A council is an assembly of legislators, advisors, or administrators. Counsel is advice. The word can also be used as a verb.

The council met yesterday to decide on the housing project.

Did you receive sufficient counsel on the matter?

The lawyer counseled his client.

credible/credible: Credible means “believable.”

Credulous means “gullible.”

The salesman came across as highly credible.

Do not be credulous and fall for the scheme.

definite/definitive: Definite means “clear, precise, known with exactness.”

Definitive means “explicit, sharply defined, or conclusive.”

There is a definite need for action.

The judge’s decision was definitive.

discreet/discrete: Discreet means “prudent, circumspect, or modest.”

Discrete means “separate or individually distinct.”

Her discreet handling of the situation put everyone at ease.

Each department operates as a discrete entity.

disinterested/uninterested: Disinterested means “unbiased or impartial.”

Uninterested means “not interested or indifferent.”

She appealed to her disinterested friends to help mediate the situation.

They remained uninterested in our business offer.

economic/economical: Economic refers to the economy. Economical means “financially prudent, frugal.”

The president has many important economic decisions to make.

Buying items on sale is an economical way to shop.

elicit/illicit: Elicit is a verb that means “to bring forth, to evoke.” Illicit is an adjective that means “unlawful.”

The teacher finally elicited the correct response.

The criminal engaged in illicit drug trafficking for several years.

emigrate/immigrate: Emigrate means “to leave one’s native country to settle in another.”

Immigrate means “to enter another country and reside there.”

My grandparents emigrated from Italy in the late 1800s.

Many Salvadorans immigrated to the United States to find work.

TIP: Both words can be used as nouns—emigrant, immigrant. Remember that emigrants emigrate from a country and that immigrants immigrate to a country.

exacerbate/exasperate: Exacerbate means “to make worse.”

Exasperate means “to exhaust (usually someone’s patience).”

Her unkink remarks exacerbated the already tense situation.

I was exasperated by his repeated denial of guilt.

farther/further: Farther refers to physical distance. Further refers to extent or degree.

London is farther north than Juneau.

This plan requires further study.

fewer/less: Fewer is used with count nouns (nouns that can be counted one-by-one); less is used with mass nouns (nouns that cannot be individually counted).

This company has fewer employees than that one. I spent less time at the museum than she did.

NOTE: When referring to time or money, less is usually used even with numbers. (I have less than two hours to shop.)

less than twenty dollars to do. Specific units of time or money use fewer only in cases where individual items are referred to. (She has fewer quarters than pennies.)

figuratively/literally: Figuratively means “metaphorically or symbolically.” Literally means “truly or actually.” It also means “according to the exact meaning of the words.”

At the sight of the shadowy figure, she figuratively jumped out of her skin.

When I heard the baby’s cries, I literally ran up the stairs as fast as I could.

Do you want me to translate the passage literally?

flounder/founder: Flounder means “to struggle.”

Founder means “to sink or fail.”

Why does she flounder so before making a decision?

The ship hit an iceberg and may founder.

foreword/forward: Foreword is a noun that refers to an introductory note or preface. Forward is an adjective or adverb that means “toward the front.” Forward is also a verb that means “to send on.”

The author explained in the foreword her reasons for writing the book.

We have seats in the forward section of the concert hall.

I will ask the Post Office to forward all mail to our new address.
COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS cont.

good/well: Good is an adjective meaning “acceptable or average.” It is never used as an adverb. Well is an adverb of manner that can also be used as an adjective to describe a state of health.

John is a good swimmer.

Today he swam exceedingly well.

Lynn did not feel well this morning.

historic/historical: Historic refers to an important event in history. Historical describes something that happened in the past, whether it was important or not.

The leaders of the two countries met in what became an historic event.

Her work involves assessment of historical records.

imply/infer: To imply is to hint at something. To infer is to conclude or surmise from evidence or circumstances.

He implied that he would not attend the party when he mentioned how tired he was.

We inferred that she was a good woman based on her kind actions.

it's/its: It's is a contraction for it is or it has. Its is a possessive adjective.

It's time to eat!

It's been nice getting to know you.

The rose lost all its petals.

TIP: Choose between it's or its by repeating the sentence aloud using it is or it has. If the sentence makes sense with one of these expressions, it's correct. Use the same strategy for all word pairs that include a contraction, such as the following:

whose who's woun't would you're

lend/loan/borrow: Lend is a verb that means “to temporarily give something to someone.” Loan is a noun meaning “something borrowed.” Borrow means “to receive something from someone temporarily.”

Please lend me a hundred dollars.

When do we need to repay the loan?

Can I borrow five dollars until tomorrow?

lie/lay: Lie is an intransitive verb (does not take an object) that means “to recline.” Lay is a transitive verb (takes an object) that means “to put something down in a certain place.”

Because she didn’t feel well, Betsy decided to lie down.

Lay the glasses carefully on the table.

NOTE: Lie and lay cause confusion in their past tenses. The past of lie is lie. (Last night I lay awake in bed.) The past of lay is laid. (He laid the package down.) The past participle of lie is lain. (The cat has lain on the sofa all day.) The past participle of lay is laid. (Have you laid the book on the table?)

lighten/lightning: Lighten is a verb that means “to reduce the weight.” Lightning is a noun that refers to the electrical discharge in the sky.

I am lightening my workload these days.

A bolt of lightning struck the tree.

like/as: Like is a preposition; as is a conjunction that is followed by a verb.

Penelope looks like a kangaroo.

Jo writes well, as do all the students in Mr. Kent’s class.

loath/loathe: Loath is an adjective that means “reluctant.” Loathe is a verb meaning “to hate or detest.”

He was loath to criticize her work for fear of reprisal.

loath discrimination of any kind.

loose/lose: Loose is an adjective that means “not tight.” Lose is a verb that means “to fail to win” or “to misplace.”

Jack’s trousers are too loose to wear without a belt.

The team cannot afford to lose another game. Please try not to lose your keys again.

luxuriant/luxurious: Luxuriant refers to thick or abundant growth. Luxurious refers to wealth and comfort.

The house had a luxuriant tropical garden.

We stayed in a luxurious hotel.

more than/over: Use more than when you mean in excess of; use over when referring to physical placement of an object.

More than 250 students participated in the rally.

The eagles flew over the mountain.

nauseated/nauseous: Nauseated means “feeling sick in the stomach or disgusted.” Nauseous means “causing one to feel sick in the stomach or disgusted.”

I was nauseated for nearly the entire day.

The storm made the cruise a nauseous experience.

number/amount: Use number with quantities that can be counted one-by-one and amount with quantities that cannot be counted.

A large number of oranges were left.

There was a small amount of juice in the container.

passed/past: Passed is the past tense and past participle of pass. Past is an adjective that refers to time gone by. It is also a preposition meaning “beyond.”

We passed the house many times.

Many changes took place in the past decade.

She walked past me without saying a word.

precede/proceed: Precede means “to come before.” Proceed means “to move forward.”

He preceded me into the room.

When I caught up with him, I proceeded to tell him off.

premier/premiere: As an adjective, premier means “first in rank or importance.” As a noun, premiere refers to the head of the state. The noun premiere refers to a first performance.

It was a premier idea.

The nation’s new premier is a strong leader.

We attended the film’s premiere.

proscribe/proscribe: Proscribe means “to command or recommend something.” Proscribe means “to outlaw something.”

The doctor prescribed antibiotics to treat her symptoms.

In some states, talking on the phone while driving has been proscribed.

principal/principle: As a noun, principal is a person who holds a position of importance, or a sum of money. As an adjective, it means “main or most important.” Principle is a noun that means “a basic rule or law.”

Our school principal has more than fifteen years of experience in education.

A portion of the payment applies to the principal of the loan.

One of the principal ingredients in paella is saffron.

Children learn many important life principles in school.

rebut/refute: Rebut means “to argue against the contrary.” Refute implies winning the argument.

While I argued in favor of changing the law, my husband rebutted.

Mary refused the speeding ticket the officer gave her.

stationary/stationery: Stationary refers to something that is fixed or unmoving. Stationery refers to writing materials.

They warned to avoid the stationary object in the road.

I printed the letter on company stationary.

than/then: Than is a conjunction used to compare things. Then is an adverb that means “at that time,” “next in order,” “in that case.”

This table is much sturdier than that one.

He was not here then.

First, we’ll make our list; then, we’ll go to the store.

If it’s sunny, then we’ll go to the beach.

that/which: That which begins restrictive clauses that single out something. Which begins nonrestrictive clauses that provide nonessential information to the sentence.

The last song that Phil sang is my favorite.

The last song, which Phil sang, is my favorite.

TIP: Commas mark the beginning of nonrestrictive clauses.

their/there/they’re: Their is a possessive adjective.

There is an adverb that specifies a place. They’re is a contraction for they are.

Jane and June finally finished their project.

The book is there on the table.

They’re planning to arrive at 6:00 p.m.

too/too/two: Too is a preposition meaning “in the direction of, toward, in contact with, for the purpose of, or to the extent of.” Too is an adverb meaning “in addition, more than enough, as well.” Two is a number.

Alicia had twenty-two books, which were too many to read in one week.

tortuous/torus: Tortuous refers to something that is complex or marked by turns, bends, or curves.

Torus refers to severe pain or anguish.

Driving up the tortuous mountain road was scary.

The loud music gave me a tortuous headache.

whether/if: Use whether to express alternatives. Use if to express a condition.

She must decide whether to go to the beach or to the mountains.

If it rains, she will go to the mountains.

whose/who’s: Whose is an interrogative word or a relative pronoun. Who’s is a contraction for who is and who has.

Whose book is this?

Jennifer is the girl who’s playing the piano.

Mrs. Ramany is the woman who’s been sending the generous donations.

won’t/won’t: Won’t is a contraction for will not. Won’t means “accustomed or used as an adjective” or “habit or custom” (as a noun).

He won’t let me drive his car because it’s new.

He spent the morning reading, and he was won’t to do.

Lucille vacationed at the beach as was her wont each summer.

your/you’re: Your is a possessive adjective. You’re is a contraction for you are.

Is this your hat or mine?

You’re wasting my time with that argument.